

Meaty Matters

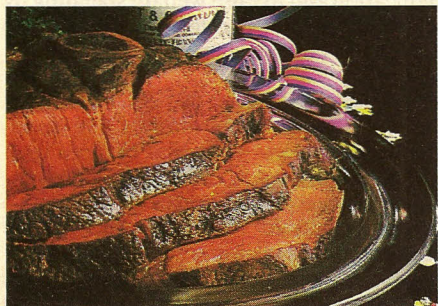
Is beef now good for you?

When it comes to knowing what is good for them, Americans seem to spend as much time grinding their teeth in frustration as actually chowing down. Almost as soon as they are comfortable with one dietary dictum, out comes a new nugget of nutritional wisdom at odds with the first. Last week consumers got just such a confusing jolt. For years they have been told that burgers and steaks are high in dreadful compounds, called saturated fats, that boost the body's supply of cholesterol and thus increase the risk of heart disease. Now researchers have demonstrated that one type of saturated fat that is plentiful in beef can actually lower cholesterol.

In a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Dr. Scott Grundy and Dr. Andrea Bonanome, both of the University of Texas at Dallas, placed eleven men on three different liquid diets, each for three weeks. The low-cholesterol liquids derived 40% of their calories from fat. One preparation used stearic acid; a second, another saturated fat called palmitic acid; and the third, oleic acid, a monounsaturated fat in olive oil. The results, which may apply only to men since no women were studied, showed that blood levels of cholesterol dropped 10% with the oleic-acid diet and a more impressive 14% on the stearic-acid formula.

Does this mean that Americans can safely gorge on mounds of meat? Emphatically not, says Dr. Grundy: "The simple message is that moderate portions of lean beef are O.K." A slab of beef may be high in stearic acid, but it is also full of palmitic acid, which raised blood cholesterol by a startling 21% in the study. Thus while the "good" fatty acid can mitigate the effect of the "bad," it cannot wholly overcome it. Americans are advised to stick to a prudent diet: no more than 30% of daily calories should come from fat, and only a third of that from saturated fat.

Still, the findings are likely to have some beneficial impact for consumers. Food manufacturers could create margarine and shortenings rich in stearic acid, which would improve taste by adding texture but without raising cholesterol. Even better, cattle breeders and ranchers may eventually hit on a way of raising animals that are high in the "good" saturated fat and low in the "bad."



Sizzling steak: hotbed of feuding fats

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Ufgood the dwarf: our hero (Davis), his patient wife (Peters) and their children

The Empire Strikes Out

WILLOW Directed by Ron Howard; Screenplay by Bob Dolman

"It was a time of dread," reads a legend at the start of George Lucas' new epic. Surely it was. We speak not only of the dour Middle Ages in which this sword-and-sorcery film is set but of the late 1980s, when Lucasfilm hit its dark age, after nearly a decade as the most profitable dream-mongering empire in movie history. By 1984 Lucas had produced five of the eight all-time top grossers. But that was a long time ago, in a land far, far away. Lucas' fantasies went murky (*Labyrinth*) or smirky (*Howard the Duck*), and his empire suddenly looked as frail as King Lear's. So Hollywood is closely watching Lucas' \$35 million gamble on *Willow*. But will moviegoers watch? To a genre weakened by formula and familiarity, Lucas has brought little new, just a reprise of his *Star Wars* plot and characters in sylvan gear. His Luke Skywalker is Willow Ufgood (Warwick Davis), a dwarf in a community of dwarfs, a young farmer put in charge of the infant who is destined to deliver his land from the terrible rule of Queen Bavmorda (Jean Marsh). On his journey to Castle Nockmaar, he acquires a few worthy friends and foes: an outlaw warrior in the Han Solo mold (Val Kilmer), a dashing knight with Lando Calrissian's righteous swagger (Gavan O'Herlihy), a willful princess with martial guile (Joanne Whalley), a Yoda-like wizard (Billy Barty), an ancient sorceress—Obi-Wan Kenobi's kid sister, perhaps—struggling under a curse (Patricia Hayes) and a couple of impish brownies reminiscent of Artoo Detoo and See Threepio.

These characters were not new with Lucas, of course; they spanned epic literature from Ulysses and King Arthur to the *Lord of the Rings* and *Gormenghast* trilo-

gies. But *Star Wars* gave a high-tech polish to the rustic hardware, a kick to the old eldritch machinery. Alas, a decade later, everything new in Lucas' films seems old again. There is a shroud of inevitability, of why-bother, about *Willow's* chase through the forest (done better in *Return of the Jedi*), the impromptu ride down a mountain on a warrior's shield (done better in *The Living Daylights*), on the whole tussle of light and dark. The only twist here is that the crucial tug of wills is between two women, the good witch and the bad, over a female messiah. One matriarch fights another in an apocalyptic biddy war.

Any Lucas film will have vagrant charms. Davis is ingratiating. So is Julie Peters playing his wife, as patient as Penelope. Director Ron Howard (*Splash*, *Cocoon*) gets the social politics of the dwarfs' village right, but he is not adept at action scenes: some are too busy; others are botched. Kilmer tries hard in a role that might have fit Mel Gibson like an iron glove, and Whalley, teen angel of the serious British mini-series (*The Edge of Darkness*, *The Singing Detective*) is wasted as the heroine. Both Kilmer and Whalley, in fact, are curiously irrelevant to the climactic battle. But then, *Willow* is a *Star Wars* without star quality, an *Indiana Jones* adventure with the heart ripped out.

"Magic is the bloodstream of the universe," goes the refrain in *Willow*, but the blood is tired this time. The old legerdemain may save a kingdom, but it can't save this movie and, maybe, the fantasy genre. The man who soared on the zeitgeist can sink when it changes. George Lucas has worked his magic before and surely will again. But for now, the wonder wand is broken.

—By Richard Corliss